Chapter 8
Connected Living for Positive Ageing

Helen Hasan
University of Wollongong, Australia

Henry Linger
Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes that social use of digital technologies can play a useful role in meeting the social and economic challenges posed by the ageing populations in developed countries. Many citizens become increasingly isolated as they age and this has a detrimental impact on their wellbeing. The authors present research which shows how, with suitable devices and ongoing support, older people can develop the digital capability to remain connected to family and community. They can also engaged in activities that give meaning to their lives. The research shows the importance of taking an individualized approach to meeting the needs of each older person who is motivated to learn and of making this learning fun. It also demonstrates how mastering just one or two digital applications can not only enhance social wellbeing but also enable citizens to have more control of their lives and be less of a burden on others.

INTRODUCTION

Along with many other changes in developed economies, the changing demography of ageing populations presents challenges to health, economic and social systems (Christensen et al., 2009). Although many older citizens, i.e. those over 65 years of

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age, are digitally literate, others can face challenges in adjusting to demands of the digital age although new forms of digital technologies can provide opportunities for positive ageing (Denvir et al., 2014). It should be acknowledged that as people age, they may need more assistance to attend to the demands of daily living (Seidel et al., 2011). Older citizens who can no longer cope at home require institutional residential care. However, care in these institutions is costly and demand for places can outstrip supply. In Australia, as in many other developed countries, one aspect of the aged care policy is to provide services that enable people to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible (Aus Govt., 2010). There is a growing number of public, private and community organizations that provide home services to meet their needs. Whether in care or at home, many of their older clients are becoming increasingly isolated as they are no longer able to get out as they once could (Grenade & Boldy, 2008). In similar circumstances, younger people would use digital devices to stay occupied and connected but less of the current cohort of older citizens have this capability. However, with suitable support and more useable technology, this can change so that participation in online activities and communities can enhance the social wellbeing of older people.

This chapter presents evidence of these positive developments from an investigation into how older citizens are learning to use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to remain connected to, and engaged in, the community as well as access to stimulating activities online. On the one hand, the research reveals the diverse challenges that people face in developing and maintaining digital capability as they age. On the other hand, it has uncovered the many benefits of participation in online activities and communities that contribute to positive ageing. Of particularly interest are (1) the variety of online community activities in which older people can engage with a little guidance and support; (2) the attributes of social and emotional wellbeing that can be enhanced through this online engagements and (3) evidence of the synergies that exist between online and offline engagement. Having the capability for connected living through online social engagement has the potential to radically enhance positive ageing and revolutionize the efficacy of the social and economic systems of aged care.

The objectives of the chapter are to (1) increase current knowledge, from the literature and the findings of the authors’ research, on older citizens’ use of ICT; (2) establish the efficacy of social ICT use in overcoming effects of isolation, (3) put forward a practical program of services that could be provided for older people to set up and use ICT, and (4) encourage more attention to this issue and motivate more research in the area.
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